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AUTHOR Foster, David E.
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ABSTRACT

The works of certain rhetorical thinkers contain strategies directed at achieving assent or cooperation. Such writings demonstrate means by which readers' rational responses can be deliberately challenged and disrupted. While people often cite Aristotle's maxim "Man is a rational animal," critics have asserted that the statement misrepresents both Aristotle and rhetoric. In practice, rhetoric unites reason and emotion by applying techniques that disrupt reasonable thinking to trigger new perspectives. For instance, Francis Bacon realized that imagination and emotion are essential to some kinds of purposeful discourse. In the contemporary era, Annie Dillard's writings legitimized the reader's indulgence in intuitive and emotional responses to the contrarities of nature, while Eldridge Cleaver's rhetoric called for a revolution in the reader's view of what is moral and just. Such appeals are subversive in a profoundly creative way, as they blur the comfortable window of reason through which nature is perceived, giving rise to new perspectives on experience. (SG)

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Imagination and the Pursuit of a Rational Rhetoric

I want to suggest that our frequently-voiced ideal of a rational rhetoric is belied by some of the most honored rhetorical theorists in western culture, even as they themselves appear to be valorizing this ideal; and as illustration, I want to show how certain texts deliberately seek to confound and dislodge reason as a mode of experience, even though their subject matter has traditionally been said to call for rationalist approaches. The latter purpose is what is responsible for my having the gall to yoke together Francis Bacon, Joseph Glanvill and Eldridge Cleaver in one essay; I hope the apparent disjunction will strike you as having at least the pretense of appropriateness. Despite our urge to privilege and praise reason as the essential ground of public discourse in such fields as morality, religion and science, there is a significant anti-rationalist element in some of our most honored textual genres, reflecting strong intuitionist and emotive modes of experience. In the texts in these genres we are told, not that we should think more clearly, but that we should revise our thinking by imagining and feeling more acutely. I would like first to touch briefly on the theories of some quite different rhetorical thinkers, to suggest that their claims for rhetoric's fealty to reason are belied by the systems they actually present. And then I would like to analyze the rhetorical strategies of certain specific texts aimed at various kinds of assent and cooperation, to show how they deliberately challenge and disrupt readers' rational responses.

We tend almost reflexively to identify reason as rhetoric's ultimate ground. Paul Bator, for example, says that Aristotle's Rhetoric rests on the premise that since "man is a rational animal," rhetoric requires "rational men using reasonable means" in purposeful discourse(427). "Right reason" is the watchword of the tradition of a rational, truth-seeking discourse. Francis Bacon maintains this tradition by identifying rhetoric's function as serving the "rational soul" by "strengthen[ing] and establish[ing] reason," specifically by filling "the imagination with observations and images, to second reason"(IV, 456). In The Advancement of Learning Bacon argues that discourse which seeks truth must avoid empty words, bringing language to the sway of ideas and things in the pursuit of truth. He treats rhetoric as a servant of reason, in need of curbing when its figurative tendencies flower beyond the tolerance of the severe rule of rational argument. This view is also promulgated in a well-known contemporary treatment of rhetoric, Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's New Rhetoric, which suggests that rhetoric can be, not just "persuasive" but "convincing" when it "presumes to gain the adherence of every rational being"(28). "Maximally efficacious rhetoric" should appeal to a "universal audience" who will be convinced only by "compelling," "self-evident," "absolute" reasoning employing "rational self-evidence" and purely "logical" proof(32).

The reiterated proposition that rhetoric must be rational has certainly not gone uncriticized. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, for example, argue that such a proposition deeply misunderstands not only Aristotle but the rhetorical enterprise itself. They suggest that "a much more accurate way to describe Aristotle's concept of the goal of rhetoric is as an interactive means of discovering meaning through language"(91), and that "both classical and modern rhetoric view people as language-using animals who unite reason and emotion in discourse with one another"(92). I think they are right, and I see my arguments today as companionable with their conclusions--but somewhat different in purpose. I'd like to extend their suggestion that rhetoric unites reason and emotion by arguing that in certain kinds of discourse rhetors use imaginative play to challenge and disrupt reasonable ways of thinking and believing, in order to create perspectives that disallow logic and linearity.

It has also been noted that rhetorical theorists have found it necessary to hedge their aspirations to rationality in the actual development of their systems. For example, Brian Vickers and James Stephens have both demonstrated that Bacon's altered attitudes toward imagination and the figurative style in his later writings, primarily De Augmentis, illustrate his awareness of the inherent tension between rhetoric's obligation to reason and its

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propensity for allowing the play of other faculties in discourse. Bacon suggests that the sense is "the door of the intellect," and that the doorkeeper is imagination, which "makes fanciful imitations of [sense impressions], or analyses and classifies them"(IV 293). In De Augmentis Bacon concludes that reason cannot function without the collaboration of imaginative play, which is not "simply and only a messenger; but it is either invested with or usurps no small authority in itself," and in some kinds of discourse--"matters of faith and religion," for example--imagination raises itself above our reason," in which the "motions of the imagination" provide an "instrument of illumination"(IV 406). Rhetoric plays a pivotal role in the relationship between reason and imagination: it is logic's companion, aiding reason by filling "the imagination with observations and images, to second reason"(IV 456). While Bacon reiterates the power of reason to discern good arguments from bad, and the importance of a plain style for scientific discourse, he never allows his distaste for ornamented styles to push imagination from its important place in the operations of rhetoric.

James Stephens reads Bacon as coming to a belief in De Augmentis that imagination "can profitably be exploited" even in scientific discourse, because it is in fact creative, a "power which allows us to see the future and the past, and that power which gives the ability both to represent a thought and to "see" another's thought, and that which both fascinates and binds man's mind to things"(61). The power of images to shape thought is inherent, according to Stephens, in Bacon's validation of imaginative play even in the plain style he judged suited to scientific discourse.

The same tension between aspiration to rationality and accommodation with the play of imagination and emotion may be found in Perelman's and Olbrecht-Tyteca's The New Rhetoric. Perelman begins by defining the aims of argument as "gaining the adherence of minds . . . [which] assumes the existence of an intellectual contact"(14) and the "rational character of adherence" itself(27). Perelman posits the "universal audience" as a construct of the relationship between rhetor and listeners, in which relationship"they can enjoy the philosophic privilege conferred to reason"(30). Thus the universal audience represents a normative rationality by means of which adherence, the end of rhetoric, is gained. But as the authors anatomize the methods of rational argumentation, they describe a wide range of imaginative and affective devices--metaphor, analogy, symbol--which, they suggest, even a rational rhetoric must depend on to achieve "imaginative thinking," a capacity they do not amplify.

Both Bacon and Perelman exemplify our culture's historical tendency to privilege reason in its discourse. I'd like to suggest, however, that some texts will show us two things about our traditional habit of making imagination and emotion subservient to reason when proposing theoretical systems. First, I hope we will see that, as Bacon came to recognize (and to exemplify in his own highly figured prose), the play of imagination and emotion are inherent in and essential to some kinds of purposeful discourse. Second, I hope we may agree that nonrational elements of discourse often enforce their own kinds of logic which are neither linear nor rational, but are powerful instruments of assent and identification nevertheless.

As my first example I'd like to offer some bits of the work of seventeenth-century "natural theologians" and members of the Royal Society, men who, taking their cues from Bacon, tended in official pronouncements to disparage ornament and figure in prose style and to dedicate their discourse to the rational plain style they thought appropriate to the advancement of learning. They saw no conflict in thinking of themselves simultaneously as scientists and theologians; they believed profoundly in a God of reason self-evident to all intelligent beings, they believed reason was the surest way to knowledge of God, but they nevertheless used a variety of imaginative strategies to further that knowledge.

Tellingly, Bacon's authority may be found behind the natural theologians' strategies. In the domain of religious assent, Bacon proposed, the play of imagination is crucial, for "[rational] contemplation of God's creatures and works produceth(having regard to the works and creatures themselves) knowledge," but not knowledge of God. Contemplation

of his works results rather in "wonder, which is broken knowledge"(Works 3, 267). Wonder is essential in drawing out the will to believe, and rhetoric is essential to produce wonder: "the end of rhetoric is to fill the imagination with observations and images, to second reason"(Works 4, 456).

Thus Bacon's linking of reason and imagination offers a crucial rationale for the natural theologians' reliance upon imagination: "sense sends all kinds of images over to imagination for reason to judge of; and reason again when it has made its judgment and selection, sends them over to imagination"(Works, 4, 406).

The natural theologians use "sensible images" of nature and of human artificing--homebuilding, coin-striking, watchmaking--to dramatize a God whose attributes have life in the known, the particular and observable. In order to emphasize God's splendid creativity, for example, they characterize natural things as brought into being by the God who is from eternity, and whose power extends like that of a fine craftsman to the smallest detail of the world he has made. Joseph Glanvill exclaims:

> How is a drop of Dew organized into an Insect? or, a lump of Clay into a more perfect Animal?
>
> .....
>
> Can unguided matter keep itself to such exact conformities, as not in the least spot to vary from the species? That divers Limners without either copy, or design, should draw the same picture . . . is more conceivable then that matter . . . should [without divine purpose] frame itself so unerringly according to the Idea of its Kind"(Scepsis Scientifica 34).

To spur readers' admiration of a God who can create like a human craftsman but on an infinitely grander scale, Glanvill argues that it would be irrational to imagine such perfected natural forms produced by any but a dvine creator. Following the argument from design, Glanvill uses the metaphor of the craftsman to help the reader imagine and personalize the Creator-God.

The clock figure was the natural theologians' favorite metaphor. Drawing out the metaphor to emphasize the intentionality which has perfectly enacted divine reason, Nathanael Culverwell asserts that "God set up the world as a fair and goodly clock, to strike in time and to move in an orderly manner, not by its own weights . . . but by fresh [and continuous] influence from himself"(26). Though believing in a God who is the "Supreme Artificer" and "Architect of Creation," these natural theologians found it entirely appropriate to encourage the reader's identification with this transcendent, infinitely intelligent craftsman through metaphoric means. They call imagination into play to "second reason" and to make its conclusions felt and personal. Under the aegis of Bacon's authority the natural theologians embraced an imaginative, highly figured style to encourage assent to an ostensibly rational faith.

The reciprocality of reason and imagination in Bacon's discourse may be contrasted with the outright disruption of reason and logic by imaginative play in certain contemporary discourse situations. Consider, for example, Annie Dillard's essay "The Fixed" in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, one of a series of pieces about her moods and perceptions as she observes natural life and forms, from insects to muskrats to constellations. At first glance it might seem to fit the genres of "nature writing" in the tradition of Edwin Way Teale. But Dillard's essays combine the intentions of the personal essay, in the tradition of Pascal and Montaigne, with the meditative observations upon nature exemplified in the writings of Henri Fabre and Loren Eiseley. Dillard's strategies suggest that she is practicing a rhetoric of wonder and assent much like that of the natural theologians, but with a very different purpose: that is, she seeks not to confirm but to dislodge a faith in a rational universe, to challenge a comfortable belief in logical cause-and-effect in the natural world.

"The Fixed" focuses on the power of natural transformations to destabilize our perceptions of the world around us. The reader is confronted with the potent irony of the term "fixed" when applied to natural forms. Dillard invokes the visual stress incurred in watching insects reproduce and kill: "no form is too gruesome, no behavior too grotesque"

for "Nature" as she assaults our perceptions(65). Yet, she continues, even as natural images show startling change, they also embody the fixity of physical forces and animal behavior--creeks that run with an unchanging music and insects that march and wheel in suicidal union. What appears fixed may change astonishingly; yet motion and light recur in unchanging patterns. By means of shifting metaphors she thrusts upon the reader the eerie disjunctiveness of our perceptions of change, implying a reader who must be ready for the unexpected in the ordinary. The natural universe runs toward infinity in two directions, centripally and centifugally, she says, and with the right imagination the speck can open into the whole: "Did the crawling Polyphemus[moth] have in its watery heart one cell, and in that cell one special molecule, and in that molecule one hydrogen atom, and round that atom's nucleus one wild, distant electron that split showed a forest, swaying?"(70).

By describing her own emotional responses to her observations, Dillard legitimizes the reader's indulgence in intuitive and emotional responses to the baffling contrarities of nature. Do you want to admire the purposefulness of nature, she asks the reader? If so, "I read there that all things live by a generous power and dance to a mighty tune"(68). But what if you are equally struck by the random wastefulness of life? If that's so, "I read there that all things are scattered and hurled"(68). These contrary readings force readers to identify with the speaker's celebration of ambivalence, and to jar the reader's confidence that any logical interpretation of nature's processes may be drawn. The speaker's provocative metaphors imply a felt strangeness about the world we think we know.

This willingness to displace the reader's confidence in logic as an interpretive strategy is echoed in a different form of purposeful discourse, a call for a revolution in the reader's perception of what is moral and just in society. In the last few decades the American public has been exposed to various forms of "revolutionary rhetoric," none of it more powerfully provocative than that offered by some African-American writers. Of enduring interest is the essay "On Becoming" in Eldrige Cleaver's well-known book Soul On Ice, a collection of hard-hitting pieces on racial passions. Cleaver seeks to shock readers and to turn them against their own preconceptions, placing them in confrontation with his own narrative voice. Polarizing images of prison mates, lawyers, writers and soldiers over against impersonal forces of oppression in America suggest that Cleaver is aiming this piece at the black and white middle class who are neither oppressed nor--directly--oppressing. "You may find this difficult to understand," says Cleaver in a cue that he is addressing readers ignorant of society's underlife, "but it is very easy for one in prison to lose his sense of self"(28). Readers hear a voice assaulting their most cherished taboos and bullying them into a radical reexamination of their inherited biases.

"On Becoming" forces upon readers a series of logical inversions which call into question the usefulness of reason and moderation in discourse about race. Hearing black prison mates express preferences for white women over black, Cleaver records his own frustrated discovery that he too was "indoctrinated to see the white woman as more beautiful and desirable than my own black woman." Self-loathing combined with readings in Marxist and Black Muslim tenets drove him to practice rape as "an insurrectionary act," a vengeful assault on "the system of values" which he came to believe conditioned his alienation from his black identity. As a writer, says Cleaver, he has discovered a new identity enabling him to articulate the inchoate rage which had driven him to sexual violence; now he can bring "into the open" the "price of hating human beings"--"loving oneself less."

Its dateline from Folsom Prison suggests the logical inversion Cleaver seeks to articulate. He urges that imprisonment is itself a normative condition in a racially sick society, and that we are all imprisoned by our racial attitudes. Freedom entails finding new ways of seeing "the snarled web of [our] motivations" in order to illuminate choices of belief and action in "America slowly coming awake"(27). The metaphor of illness also invites us to see the racial situation from a radically disruptive perspective: "from my prison cell," says Cleaver, "I have watched the sit-ins, the freedom raids, the Mississippi Blood Summers . . . . we are a very sick country"(27). The "black man's sick attitude

toward the white woman is a revolutionary sickness," he proclaims--revolutionary because the illness itself may be seen as a force for change, its symptoms disrupting our customary and comforting racial attitudes and forcing us to see our relations in radically new ways. All the metaphorical energy of the piece illuminates the raw ache of the here and now, drawing readers into the experience of irrational, destructive self-alienation as a way of seeing the dysfunction of the present system.

Such appeals to the irrational and illogical are not diversionary, but subversive in a profoundly creative way. They deliberately blur the comfortable window of reason through which it is our habit to perceive images of the divine, or nature, or our own cherished moralities. They oblige us to resee the familiar structures of experience, making way for the continuous revisions and reshapings which in our better moments we know our lives require.

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David Foster
Drake University